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ABSTRACT

A technique for "warming up" a class in English as a second language involves writing a non-threatening, noncontroversial but thought-provoking word related to the day's general topic on the board and giving students time to write down as many related words as they can think of. Students are asked to volunteer their words, one at a time, to be written on the board. The words can then be categorized or used in sentences as a completion of the exercise. The benefits of this kind of exercise are that it prepares the students to go to work, alerts them to the day's topic, develops high-level cognitive skills such as analysis and synthesis, improves vocabulary and usage, allows student ideas to be supported, gives the students a degree of responsibility for their learning, and allows them to assimilate a linguistic and cultural pattern of the English-speaking world. Follow-up activities such as poetry, debates, and mystery story writing can enhance the usefulness of the exercise. Some words have been found to be consistently useful in getting good student response. (MSE)

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THE MENTAL WARM-UP: An Activity to Promote Quality Learning

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Summary

The Mental Warm-Up: An Activity to Promote Quality Learning

Inspiring ESL students to learn something new or to find out how information on one subject may indirectly lead to other subjects often depends on how well teachers introduce the material. This usually occurs in the first five minutes of class, even though the students may not yet be ready to learn.

To "warm them up," the teacher writes on the board a warm-up word related to the day's lesson; the students have one minute to write as many words associated with it as possible. Students and teacher then work together to make the connection with the day's subject as these words are transcribed on the board and grouped according to ideas.

The benefits are: the students' systems are "on"; they are aware of the day's lesson and participate in their own education; they improve vocabulary and usage; they gain an appreciation of their peers; they become "published."

A sample warm-up exercise exemplifies speed and timing, variety, student involvement, and follow-up activities.

Although originally designed as an English classroom warm-up, this activity yields added benefits in an ESL classroom, where students assimilate a new linguistic and cultural pattern which facilitates their integration into American society.

THE MENTAL WARM-UP: An Activity to Promote Quality Learning

Inspiring students to learn something totally new, to understand how pieces of knowledge fit together, or to find out how information on one subject may have secret tunnels leading to a dozen others is often a function of how well teachers present the matter in question.

Since that presentation usually occurs in the first five minutes of class, it is imperative that the students be "warmed-up" before they begin their mental activities. Thomas R. McDaniel refers to this as "readiness to learn,"[1] and cites the absolute necessity of what is termed by many as "set induction," or "focusing event" for its ability to create anticipation. But this is only one of the benefits to be reaped from the daily mental warm-up.

In this study, I will first present the warm-up process and possible problems, then discuss benefits and follow-up activities for Junior High, High School, and College students.

THE PROCESS

Start by writing a non-threatening, non-controversial, but

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[1] T.R. McDaniel, "The Ten Commandments of Motivation," Clearing House, Sept. 1985: 22.

thought-provoking word in all capital letters on the most visible classroom blackboard: "Hero" for example. The first day, explain that a word will be thus presented every day. The students will have one minute to write down as many relevant, associated words as possible in their notebooks. Tell them to let their minds wander some, but not to lose sight of the warm-up word. Encourage them to be creative and imaginative, then tell them "Go!" enthusiastically.

The word should lead students to think about what you intend to teach that day, and you must therefore be able to work backwards from the specifics of your own planned lesson to the more general aspects of it in order to give students room to find their own way into the subject.

Circulate discreetly around the room, showing that you're interested that the students write something. You can be taking care of administrative details at this time as well.

After a minute, and ask if they have ten words. If the majority does not, tell them they can have another minute to think. Be generous; give them 90 seconds, if necessary, especially with beginners. Colleagues have told me that with younger children they allow several minutes here, and this is fine. Finish checking roll silently, and get ready to give each student your total attention. Remember: do NOT shout "Time!" or any such awakening back to the reality of English class, and do

only a lively classroom, but an educative and interesting one.

Give the students now a few seconds to sit back and look at their ideas "in print" on the board. This step of "publishing" matters tremendously to the students and can be considered "the writer's solo flight, winning basket, birdie; it is the writer's curtain call, recital, aria; it is the writer's exhibit, premier, trophy; it is the writer's touchdown."[3]

Tell your student writers to next rearrange and classify the words into categories, or to make sentences using them; underline or circle words as they are used. Once this categorization is complete, the tunnel is essentially built leading from the ideas "discovered" by the students to the subject of your discussion. Your students have been using higher-level thinking skills in the first five minutes of class, while preparing themselves for the subsequent learning activity.

All students may not be adept at this from the start and may need more time the first week, but they soon learn to get ready more quickly for class, and are able to come up with ten, even fifteen words.

Some students may not want to say their words out loud in class for fear they won't be "good enough." This problem is

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[3] J.A. Carroll, "Publishing: The Writer's Touchdown," English Journal Apr. 1983: 93.

not chat with or distract anyone. When the time comes, tell them in a regular tone of voice (perhaps softer than regular for some of us), that they need to be finishing up their last word. As you move back to the front of your classroom, assure the students you saw some good words, and are anxious to hear them all. At this point, each student will give a response to the warm-up word.

However, depending on the class, age, and nationality, the first day's warm-up words can be put on the board or not. To avoid embarassing anyone on the first day, take volunteers' answers first. If you keep the warm-up oral for a few days, be sure to start putting students' words on the board soon thereafter, as this is important for maintaining their participation, interest, and encouraging thinking skills.

Write each word on the board, giving a nod or positive comment. If a problem arises, and a student claims "But they've taken all my words!" say that you'll get back to that student. After several responses, do go back, and keep doing so until a new word is given, thereby showing the class that you indeed hold them responsible for their own work. To encourage this participation and to further develop student interest during this activity, "Walk around the room constantly...look over shoulders...Monitor their work. Keep an eye on the clock...Keep it lively."[2] Done correctly, this warm-up activity promises not

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[2]Charles F. Totten, Participants in Learning, Not Spectators, (Apr. 25, 1985), 6.

easily remedied by the teacher, who gives that indication of approval to every contribution. Students are very sensitive to this, even at the college level. Teacher praise is often just what they need to keep them moving towards their goals.

BENEFITS

The Mental Warm-Up is specifically designed to keep students moving in the right direction, from the very moment they enter our classrooms. Both students and teachers enjoy the befefits of this activity. They are:

The students are ready to work. Their systems are "on." This is essential, for "often we try to teach before the students are ready to learn."[4] Teachers need to develop strategies to avoid the problem of having students who are "turned off."

The students are aware of the day's general topic and are curious to see how it will be developed.
We must "pique the students' curiosity so that they will want to pursue the subsequent learning activity."[5] Students discover conncecting tunnels to fields of study and concepts they never knew existed before, thus supporting our attempts to give them an interdisciplinary education.

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[4] McDaniel, 22.

[5] McDaniel, 22.

The students develop higher-level thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis.

Too much time is often spent on the lower-level thinking skills in the classrom: basic facts, definitions, vocabulary; therefore, any opportunity to even briefly draw out the thought processes of the students ought to be seized. "Sometimes students change their minds as soon as they hear themselves state ideas orally and see them recorded on the chalkboard. This process results in greater clarity of thinking and more logical reasoning."[6]

The analysis and synthesis-level behaviors, based on Bloom's Taxonomy, are summarized by J.M. Harrison as being able to "diagnose a situation, determine its component parts, and focus on the relationship between the parts"[7] and to "put together information to form a whole that has not clearly been seen before."[0] These behaviors are illustrated in the students' initial creation of responses, in their observation of everyone else's contributions on the board, then in their subsequent categorizing and sentence-making activity which redefines new groups, or new "wholes," encouraging them to make focused, concerted efforts using these higher level cognitive skills.

The students improve vocabulary and usage.

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[6] Carolyn S. Hughes, "Teaching Strategies for Developing Thinking," School Library Media Quarterly Fall 1986, 36.

[7] James Michael Harrison, The Relationship Between Bloom's Taxonomy and Critical Thinking Skills, diss. Vanderbilt University, 1984, 39.

[0] Harrison, 39.

In an English classroom, the warm-up gives students an opportunity to play with words and ideas. This "playing" is very important, for students who contribute words and listen to their classmates do the same within a given context, are more likely to remember and use those words than if vocabulary lists had been handed out to study and memorize. The warm-up thus makes language relevant and enjoyable for students, as they learn to laugh at and appreciate the often amusing combinations of words that develop at this time.

The students become "published," and gain an appreciation of their peers' work.

Students who see their own ideas on the blackboard feel respected, and as these are often students who rarely if ever publish in school literary magazines or newspapers, we must find ways to give them the same delight and pride of accomplishment as their more "literary" classmates. Therefore "printing, going public, making known, disseminating, issuing, circulating --- in a word --- **publishing** the written language of your students"[9] allows them to hear the applause from within themselves, often for the very first time, and when combined with teacher and/or student approval, it becomes a major factor in promoting academic and personal growth.

The students are given the responsibility of participating in their own education.

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[9]Carroll, 93.

A federal study group on Excellence in 1984 reported "three Conditions for Excellence vital to the improvement of undergraduate education:(...)Of the three, student involvement is judged 'perhaps the most important.'"[10] The mental warm-up assures students that they will enjoy a certain amount of participation. When that occurs at the beginning of class, there results a feeling of involvement, which helps them in improving their performance in both cognitive and affective areas of development.

The students assimilate a new linguistic and cultural pattern, with the teacher's guidance, thus facilitating their integration into the English-speaking world.
This is that unmeasurable "comfortableness" with one's surroundings that can usually only come with time, and it is acquired often slowly and imperceptibly. Through teacher-student exchanges in the warm-up, the students get the "feel" for the language and therefore for their overall environment. This activity is of tremendous value to an ESL student who is sometimes struggling not only to learn English, but to learn about the people who speak it as well.

Warmed-up students are ready to learn, and whether the planned lesson is followed or something different grows out of the warm-up, the time that the students remain on-task increases

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[10] "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education" Sept. 1984 in Charles F. Totten, 2.

and the quality of their work is significantly greater than if they are forced to plunge directly into grammar books at the sound of a tardy bell.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

The following activities developed from warm-up words I have used, with student suggestions often improving upon my planned projects.

POETRY (High School) The time was the week before Valentine's Day, and the lesson was Shakespearean sonnets. The warm-up words were most traditional and banal: LOVE, BEAUTY, HEART, etc. and students were obliged to think up original responses. From these words, they found the inspiration to imitate the sonnet style in a creative way. They neatly wrote their own sonnets, checking rhyming patterns and number of lines, then affixed them to a very large red heart posted on the back wall. Some students preferred anonymity, and this of course was respected. But the "published" sonnets were there for all to see.

DEBATES (High School & College) Very often the warm-up words inspired a number of opposite responses, and the classroom turned into a forum for discussion with me as the mediator. Indian, Korean, Lebanese, and Israeli students were in one classroom in West Africa; Black and Hispanic, some Vietnamese and a few White students animated another. Both classes developed responses which were the source of political, religious, racial, economic, and educational discussions, which enriched the students as well as enlightened me. Discussions often contnued after class ended, and those entering the room for the next hour would also get involved. Thinking had begun before the tardy bell had rung!

MYSTERY STORY WRITING (Intermediate, High School, College) As a group activity with four to five students per group, one scribe each, these ESL students wrote a 2-4 page story using all of the responses from that day's warm-up word. You may also decide upon a different story type and form, such as a fairy tale, an amusing story, a myth, science fiction, romance in

epistolary style, adventure incorporating flashback, or whatever you are teaching at the time. This gives the students a take-off point, and teaches them a self-start mechanism for future use.

I have used the Mental Warm-Up with children as young as nine years old in my ESL classroom in West Africa, with adults over 60 in French continuing education centers, in American and French high schools and universities. Students never fail to participate in some way, and they take interest in this activity. I have even used it when substituting English and ESL classes, and the reduction of pandemonium it permits along with the creativity it inspires makes this an invaluable tool for any substitute as well as any classroom teacher.

Finally, here are a few samples of warm-up words to which I have received outstanding responses from high school and college students and adults:

ADVENTURE	TIME	SUPERNATURAL
LOVE	FANTASY	LIFE
HERO	ART	ENVIRONMENT
PEOPLE	DREAM	POETRY
HEART	EQUALITY	HELP
MEMORIES	RACE	EQUAL
DISCOVER	EVIL	ISLAND
BEAUTY	MOOD	FOREVER
WORLD	HOME	PERFECT
SUCCESS	POWER	PROBLEM

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